Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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Week of May 21, 2007

PAMI RELEASES SOFTWARE TO AID IN AGRI-BUSINESS DECISIONS

After months of research and development, the Prairie Agricultural Machinery Institute (PAMI) has released an innovative software program created to aid producers and entrepreneurs in making critical agricultural business decisions.

The project, which was funded by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's Agriculture Development Fund, was initiated to look at the economics of whole-crop harvesting, but the resulting computer program can be applied to many different types of farming operations, explained Les Hill, the Business Development and Technical Services Manager for PAMI.

"The basis of the program is an outline of a farm model, including multiple crops, prices, yield and the cost of growing the crops, which are re-configurable to different farm situations," he said. Producers begin by inputting data to create a model of their particular farm situation. Once a farm model has been created, the program allows the producer to see the impact of selecting various pieces of equipment for cutting and gathering, combining and handling the grain. The producer can also calculate the economic cost of different methods of byproduct harvesting based on the choice of equipment.

The program also offers an option to create a second farm plan alongside the first one, so that producers can compare and contrast different variations of inputs and approaches. Hill says the goal was to enable as many combinations as farmers might want to see in order to get their farm plans just the way they want them.

He said the comprehensiveness of the program is one of its best features, enabling producers to look at the full implications of any decision on their overall farming operation. An overview of the "complete system" is provided wherever possible. For example, Hill says the machinery section includes financing and depreciation information, which can significantly affect a lot of the choices a farmer might make.

The flexibility of the program allows producers to set their parameters and to tailor the program to suit every possible scenario in which they might be interested, he stated. "What if I were to go for higher-yield crops? What if I were to change my approach here? What would this do for me?"

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Currently, producers can have a copy of the software mailed to them free of charge by calling PAMI at (306) 682-5033. In the future, PAMI may begin charging for the program, depending on demand. At this moment, there is no telephone support line for the program, but Hill assures that PAMI will do its best to help anyone having issues with the product.

"We will be making arrangements with the first few individuals ordering the software to get some feedback on the program," he said. "This way, we will be able to see whether we missed the mark or if we were dead on."

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INDUSTRY SUPPORTERS HOST FOOD AND FUEL CONFERENCE

Emerging industries such as biofuels are creating new opportunities and new challenges with respect to the research being done in the agricultural sector.

A number of organizations, therefore, felt it would be timely to have a discussion around the implications these new areas of interest are having on traditional agricultural research. The result of their efforts is the "Food and Fuel" conference, taking place June 4 to 6 at the University of Saskatchewan.

The conference is being hosted by the Canadian Agricultural Economics Society (CAES), the Canadian Agricultural Innovation Research Network (CAIRN) and Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS), a project affiliated with the U of S aimed at helping to increase the connection between science and the public.

Richard Gray, a professor of agricultural economics at the U of S, is involved in both CAES and CAIRN, and is a member of the conference organizing committee.

"We will be looking at the implications [of the new demands for biofuel crops] on agricultural research policy," he explained. "The additional demands put on agricultural research – including safety, health and environment, to name a few – have pulled resources away from research into increasing yields and lowering costs on the farm."

If agriculture is going to provide continued food security while addressing the demand for fuel, Gray foresees a need to revitalize productivity growth. "As the world's population continues to grow, there is significant global demand for products such as biofuel, which, in turn, has created a real need to increase productivity growth in order to avoid a food crisis in the future."

The answer, according to Gray, is to figure out how to do research more effectively, and to put more resources into agricultural research.

The conference's organizing committee has assembled a group of speakers from Australia, the United States and Canada to discuss some of these provocative issues.

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"We hope there will be a fair bit of time at the end of the seminar for a panel discussion involving some of the major players in the industry, including both the public and private sectors and various funding groups," Gray said.

Gray feels the Food and Fuel conference will have considerable interest for a broad range of groups, including producers, academics, agricultural researchers, policy-makers and even members of the general public.

By increasing the overall level and effectiveness of agricultural research, not only producers, but society as a whole, will benefit, he said.

Platinum sponsors for the conference are Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Saskatchewan Council for Community Development.

Additional information and registration instructions are available on the KIS website at www.kis.usask.ca. The registration fee is $200 per person.

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PROVINCIAL PEST CONTROL PROGRAM TO BE ADMINISTERED BY PCAB

The Provincial Council of Agriculture Development and Diversification (ADD) Boards for Saskatchewan Inc., or PCAB, will be given responsibility for administering pest control efforts across the province under a new arrangement with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF).

The "Fieldworker Program," a co-ordinated pest control effort, began in Saskatchewan in 1972. Grants were provided to ADD Boards and rural municipalities, which worked together to organize control initiatives at the local level. Pest Control Officers (PCOs) were employed by the ADD Boards and RMs to deliver services on the ground and to help property owners develop effective control methods.

As the provincial body representing ADD Boards, PCAB has long played an important role in program delivery, maintaining Pest Control Co-ordinators who focused on creating a more uniform pest control initiative across the province.

For its part, SAF administered the Fieldworker Program, including the designation of grants. However, in order to facilitate improved program delivery, streamline the funding process, and encourage education and awareness, SAF has now given PCAB the opportunity to take over the management of the entire initiative.

According to Tracy Wickstrom, PCAB's Pest Control Co-ordinator, the move will allow the Council to establish a better line of communication with ADD Boards, RMs and PCOs without disrupting the delivery of a program that has been very beneficial across the province.

"PCAB will handle both administration and delivery, rather than them being separated," she said. "From the average producer's perspective, they won't notice a big change in how the program is delivered. They will still look to their local Pest Control Officers as their primary point of contact.

"What it will do is change the contact between the ADD Boards or RMs and SAF. Basically, their project applications will no longer be going to SAF, they will be coming directly to PCAB."

Wickstrom expects the streamlining will hold a number of benefits for overall pest control efforts in Saskatchewan, simplifying the process and reducing the number of channels through which program stakeholders need to navigate.

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"It facilitates our communication amongst our ADD Boards and PCOs as to the efforts they're undertaking, and enables us to be in better contact with them on a regular basis about their programs and their needs," she stated.

PCAB is a non-profit agriculture organization that focuses on timely, effective delivery of agriculture programs to Saskatchewan producers. It is committed to working with both government and industry to ensure a co-operative, efficient approach to agricultural program delivery.

PCAB is the provincial level of the ADD system. Each of the 296 RMs in Saskatchewan has an ADD Committee, from which a delegate is selected to serve on one of 41 District ADD Boards. Each District is then represented on one of six Regional Councils. PCAB's board of directors consists of two delegates chosen from each Regional Council. This structure ensures a strong connection to grassroots agriculture.

For more information on the organization or provincial pest control efforts, please visit www.saskpcab.com, or call (306) 955-5477.

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PRODUCERS ENCOURAGED TO USE AUGER INTAKE GUARD

Grain augers rank third in machinery-related injuries on the farm. That's why producers are strongly encouraged to use an auger intake guard when moving grain.

Jim Wassermann, the Vice President of Saskatchewan Operations for the Prairie Agricultural Machinery Institute (PAMI), says the device can be effective in preventing some serious injuries.

"The intake of an auger is a very dangerous component. Flighting has the capability to cut or amputate parts of your hands or feet if you accidentally engage it. The types of injuries that may result are major and cause long-term problems," he said.

An auger guard acts to protect against such accidents, but Wassermann says there are some situations in which producers may want to temporarily remove these protective devices. Inserting the auger into a bin with a small bin hole or moving a trashy crop that is prone to bridging over the top of the guard are two such instances.

Unfortunately, this is where problems often start.

"I do find that producers are eager to use their auger guards," Wassermann said. "But once they remove the guard, the timing might be inconvenient for them to put it back on immediately, or they will simply get busy and forget to reinstall it."

The risks of using an auger without a guard are well known throughout the industry. Yet the statistics have not seemed to encourage much change in the way auger guards are manufactured. Wassermann feels this is partly due to the makers of these products facing competing demands.

"In legal disputes regarding this situation, rulings encourage manufacturers to attach the guard in a way that is very difficult for producers to remove. Therefore, the producer's only option is to cut it off with a cutting torch or remove the number of bolts that hold it on," Wassermann stated.

"The downside is that there are still situations when producers might want to temporarily remove the guard. So unfortunately, once removed, it becomes a major job to put it back in place."

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It is possible for producers to safely manufacture their own auger guards. In fact, Wassermann says this currently might be the only alternative for some older augers. To help producers with the task, PAMI has developed a set of instructions that can be downloaded from its website at www.pami.ca.

A Canadian Standards Association (CSA) committee is also looking at national standards for portable grain augers. One of their goals is to review the effectiveness of the auger intake guard. The resulting new standard could stimulate design changes on new augers.

PAMI has developed an auger guard that addresses many of the traditional problems associated with the devices. The "star mesh" design they have come up with is less prone to bridging in trashy crops, and is capable of supporting a 270-pound person.

As well, in order to eliminate the "nuisance" excuse for not putting the guard back into place once it is removed, PAMI has included a quick-move collar that allows the entire guard assembly to slide six feet up the tube without requiring tools. Removal and replacement are 10-second jobs.

Wassermann says the model is not a completely foolproof solution, but it has several advantages over conventional designs.

Unfortunately, the guard is so new that nobody is manufacturing it at this point. As a result, producers aren't able to purchase it yet. "We are currently working with the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association to look at ways to make it available to producers across Canada," he said.

But given the potential dangers and injury statistics associated with this essential piece of farm equipment, Wassermann is able to offer one important bit of advice to producers. "Find the best working solution to ensure your auger intake is guarded."

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CYPRESS HILLS WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS NATIVE PRAIRIE APPRECIATION WEEK

June 17 to 23 marks Saskatchewan's ninth annual Native Prairie Appreciation Week – and also means that another interactive field trip will be organized to showcase the pristine beauty of one of the province's natural hot spots.

The Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP) is one of the organizations involved in planning events around this special week. Manager Karyn Scalise says that PCAP and its partners co-ordinate a workshop and field tour every year as part of their efforts.

"It's held in a different place each year," Scalise said. "Part of our goal is to familiarize participants with different wonderful places in Saskatchewan, and to give a snapshot of what that area is like."

Past field trips have been held in the Big Muddy Badlands, the Great Sand Hills, the Moose Mountain area, Grasslands National Park and the Manitou Sand Hills.

This year, organizers decided to centre their workshop and tour at the Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park. "It's the place where we held our very first Native Prairie Appreciation Week back in 1999," Scalise noted. "For the past three years, it's also been the site that our participants said in their evaluations that they most wanted to return to."

The field trip will take place June 20 and 21. It will include a combination of in-class discussions and tours to local ranches and to sites within the park.

"We spend a little bit of time in a chair hearing presentations and a lot of time out in the field experiencing it for yourself – plus good food and lots of it," Scalise said.

The event kicks off with a workshop covering a variety of topics, such as area plants and birds, heritage ranching and ranching for biodiversity.

Participants will get to put some of their newfound skills into practice, with a native plant identification team challenge and an optional bird hike planned as part of the two-day event.

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Discussion will also focus on how to do health assessments on forest and riparian areas (areas near water). "This is a methodology being developed by many different groups in Saskatchewan," Scalise said. "It's a series of small tests that you can perform in an area to get an indication of whether your rangeland is healthy, healthy with a few problems that need to be identified, or unhealthy."

The ranch tours will definitely be among the highlights of this year's field trip, Scalise says, because they plan on visiting the ranches of two environmental stewardship award winners. Here, participants will see a stock dog demonstration and an example of how to use sheep to control certain weeds.

To provide a unique Saskatchewan experience, a barbeque banquet will be held during the first evening at the Cypress Hills Vineyards. "Whoever thought we'd be wine-tasting in Saskatchewan?" Scalise said with a chuckle.

The event holds a little bit of something for anyone who enjoys the prairies, learning about nature, or experiencing the great outdoors. "That's the really great thing about this event. It attracts a diverse crowd. It's everyone from ranchers to birders and other naturalists, to plant and wildlife specialists who work for government or non-government organizations, to average people who simply enjoy learning about nature and the environment around them," she stated.

"It provides a terrific forum for all of these people with different interests to come together and celebrate the special diversity that native prairie grasslands hold."

More details and registration information on the Cypress Hills field trip can be obtained on the PCAP website at www.pcap-sk.ca or by calling (306) 352-0472.

Participation will be limited to 150 people, so anyone interested in attending is encouraged to register early. The pre-registration deadline is June 8. Fees are $75 for producers and students, and $105 for non-producers.

Those attending are expected to make their own arrangements for lodging and transportation to the Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park. From there, bus coaches will be arranged for all tours.

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